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Using Movies in Language Classrooms as Means of Understanding Cultural Diversity

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Abstract

In a globalised world with different languages and cultures, learning foreign languages is a necessity for ensuring international communication and understanding. Considering the fact that language and culture are inseparable, learning a language also involves learning the associated culture. The close interdependency between culture and language can be used to contribute to social cohesion and stability, in areas where cultural bias, political and religious hostility is prevalent. Therefore, language teaching practices can be used to eradicate stereotypes and to promote intercultural understanding, universally shared values, which will serve to the peaceful coexistence of different people in the world. Movies chosen appropriately for this purpose, with a rich source of cultural events and varying patterns of human behaviors, seem to be an appropriate tool to enhance the understanding of cultural diversity. This study describes the rationale, ways and activities of using movies in language classrooms as a means of developing the understanding for cultural diversity.

Keywords: *Movies, Language Classrooms, Teaching, Learning and Cultural Diversity*

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Introduction

Rapid advancement in information, telecommunications and transportation, has transformed societies, with different languages and cultures, into bilateral and multilateral relationships of a globalised world. Therefore learning foreign and second languages has become a great need for ensuring international communication and understanding. Language and culture cannot be separated. Therefore, learning a language, in a way comes to mean learning the culture of people speaking that language. The close interdependency between culture and language can be used as a vehicle to contribute to social cohesion and stability everywhere, especially in parts of the world where cultural bias, political and religious hostility seem strong and influence people's motives, beliefs and behaviors.

Language teaching practices can be used effectively in order to eradicate stereotypes and to promote intercultural understanding, universally shared values and human rights. Classrooms of language education seem to be appropriate medium to play a key role in forming the base for mutual understanding and collaboration in terms of cultural pluralism. Movie films chosen appropriately for the purpose of learning or teaching a foreign or second language are a rich source of cultural events. Therefore using movies with rich content describing different aspects of culture of different people in language classrooms seems to be a very appropriate tool to enhance the understanding of cultural diversity and to get the sense of cultural awareness and the sense of the humanity of other people. In this study, we will describe the rationale, ways, and activities of using movie films as a means of developing an understanding for cultural diversity while teaching a language (basically English) in classrooms.

Language and Culture

The National Center for Cultural Competence defines culture as,

An integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting and, relationships and expected behaviors of a racial, ethnic, religious and social group;

and the ability to transmit the above to succeeding generations.
(Goode, Sockalingam, Brown & Jones, 2000)

According to this definition language is an integral part of the culture. In the 2nd UNESCO World Report, the diversity of human cultures is described as including “the wealth of languages, ideas, beliefs, kinship systems, customs, tools, artistic works, rituals and other expressions they collectively embody” (UNESCO 2009, p.25). In both explanations above, culture seems as a broad concept that is deeply linked to language concepts.

It is indicated in Baker (2003) that Halliday’s socio-semiotic view of language emphasizes the social meanings that language both represents and shapes, "The social structure is not just an ornamental background to linguistic interaction...It is an essential element in the evolution of semantic systems and semantic processes." (1979, p.114) According to this view every language will reflect the values, beliefs and assumptions of the culture it represents. Thus learning a language will also involve learning the culture that the language expresses. Kramsch (2006, pp.6-10) on the other hand, defines culture as “membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and common imaginings”. Members of that community may retain a common system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating and acting, which is their ‘culture’. Common attitudes, beliefs, and values are reflected in the way members of the group use language. This is a view of culture that focuses on the ways of thinking, behaving, valuing currently shared by members of the same discourse community. Thus culture is implied to have influence over the use and development of language.

There is significant interdependency between language and culture. Language being the main medium of expression of the culture, as we use language we often represent a particular identity and give clues of our roles and memberships in social environment. Culture does not exist apart from language or from us, as language users. Therefore no use of language and no individual language user can be considered to be ‘culture-free,’ rather we are always carriers and agents of culture. Hence learning a language means learning the culture of the people who speak that language.

Learning culture also contributes to and enhances the learning of the language and, therefore, there are many benefits of teaching culture in language classes. It gives students a reason to study the target language. It helps learners to relate the forms of languages to real people and places. These benefits, however, are not limited to learning the target language, but they are also related to understanding cultural diversity and peaceful coexistence of different people in the same world. Some of such benefits of teaching culture were listed in Genç and Bada (2004) as:

- Increasing learners' curiosity, interest, and motivation in target countries,
- Nurturing tolerance towards different ideologies, religions, and cultures,
- Giving learners a liking for the native speakers of the target language,
- Playing a useful role in learning the geography, history, etc of the target culture,
- Helping learners to observe similarities and differences among various cultural groups.

In short teaching culture would lead the language learners to get a sense of the humanity of other people. Teaching culture in language classrooms seems to play a key role in forming the base for mutual understanding and collaboration in terms of cultural pluralism. Furthermore there is an indispensable link between understanding cultural diversity and peaceful coexistence of different people in the globalizing world, which seems closely related to getting over the problems of social stability, national security, the maintenance of human rights and humanistic values. This practice will also be in line with the tasks of the UNESCO concerning the world community, and its aim of elaboration of innovation strategies of a modern cultural policy.

For these reasons, intercultural understanding poses itself as an important issue in language learning and teaching. Incorporating the study of culture into the curriculum of foreign language teaching has been considered a matter of priority by language educators in the United States. In fact it is believed that students cannot really master a language unless they have also mastered the cultural contexts in which the language occurs (Peterson and Coltrane, 2003).

Cultural awareness involves an understanding not only of the culture of the target language but also that of the learners' own culture.

According to Byram and Fleming two important communicative competences in language learning require the development of cultural awareness: While communicative competence requires an understanding of the norms of social interaction of one socio-cultural community, intercultural communicative competence necessitates an understanding of the differences of interactional norms between different speech communities and an ability to "reconcile or mediate between different modes present" (1998, p.12). Therefore the notion of 'cultural awareness' is central to intercultural communicative competence. Without considering this cultural awareness as a basic part of language learning a successful communication may be impossible.

When people with different cultural sets come together, confrontation of different cultural elements and values may often end up in mutual understanding and compromise, while in other cases it may result in clash and conflict. If we look at the case of mutual understanding and compromise we may consider the development of the process most probably in the following order: After a certain period of cohabitation, members of these different cultural elements may begin to look for the reasons behind those cultural behaviors and actions.

Once the process of recognition starts, it is carried to a further point of understanding each other. As soon as the mutual understanding is reached, the empathy follows and finally comes sympathy and appreciation at the end of the gradual proceeding of the natural development. But this is not always the case. Sometimes the opposite happens and the confrontation of different cultures concludes in a crisis. In other words, members of different cultures, in some cases, may misunderstand and misinterpret each other's behaviors and cultural values.

The second case of learning about the other culture and of recognizing the members of the other group may turn out to be very expensive in the end. Therefore another less risky, but a secure method should be sought to introduce a new culture to the learners of a language without leaving them in discouraging confrontational situations. One of these methods can be the use of movie films in language classrooms for the purpose of getting acquainted the learners of that language with the

cultural elements of the speakers of that language. Thus novice language learners may learn a lot about the traditions, manners, and the other cultural elements of the native speakers of the new language in the peaceful medium of the classroom, with no fear of criticism. This practice will also be in line with the tasks of the UNESCO concerning the world community, and its aim of promoting the cultural diversity through innovative strategies of a modern cultural policy.

The promotion of cultural diversity – the "common humanity heritage" according to the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, 2001 has become one of the most important issues in maintaining dialogue and peace in the world. Intercultural dialogue was considered as the guarantee of peace and of preventing "the inevitable clash of cultures and civilizations" (UNESCO 2002, p.11). Cultural diversity is a driving force of development, not only in the growth of economic life but also in the growth intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual life. In order to provide a solid basis for the promotion of cultural diversity, a number of international conventions have been promoted by UNESCO since 2001.

21 May has been celebrated as the World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development. The aim of this Day is to nurture the experience of the diversity with curiosity, by engaging in dialogue and listening to one another through cultural enterprises, creative industries, cultural tourism and protecting cultural heritage. The year 2008 was declared by UNESCO as the International Year of Languages, which proves that languages and multilingualism is a vital item, having considerable effects on the making and practice of national language policies. At the same time, acceptance and recognition of cultural diversity – in particular through innovative use of media and ICTs – are conducive to dialogue among civilizations and cultures, respect and mutual understanding. It is believed that this approach will recover the sense of a joint commitment to promoting the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind. (The ideas and information mentioned in this section were taken from the portal of UNESCO <http://portal.unesco.org>). Using movie films in promoting cultural

understanding in language classrooms can be regarded as a part of these innovative strategies.

Movie Films as Rich Sources of Culture

Movie films chosen for the purpose of learning or teaching a foreign or second language may enable us to observe varying patterns of human behaviors, including thoughts, beliefs, values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting, etc. Thus using movies with rich content describing different aspects of culture of different people seems to be a very appropriate tool to enhance the understanding of cultural diversity and to get the sense of cultural awareness and the sense of the humanity of other people. There are many reasons for why movie films and video documents are believed to be good means to enhance the understanding of cultural diversity.

First, movie films are windows into culture. They highlight particular sectors from the general cultural life of a society. While watching a film with a topic describing presidential elections in the United States, we also come up with information about let us say, American political system, the ways of motivating American voters, the social and political circles that are influential in the presidential elections, etc. Similarly when we watch a movie film with a topic on the school life of the hero, we learn and observe many things about the educational environment, the interracial relations, and the traditions and details about the routines of the daily life in that society. In the same way we may acquire knowledge and information about particular places and times, about how people live, think and behave, about body language, styles of dress, table manners, gender roles, ways of treating children and talking to bosses, elders and peers, etc.

Second, all kinds of discourse showing the use of language in most contexts, can be found in movie films. This is something which cannot be provided in textbooks and classroom with much effect. The context in which the discourse take place display very clearly to the viewer the contextual variables of the language such as status, age, and sex of participants, the speaker's feelings and communicative intentions, the relationship the speaker has with the hearer, the content of the

utterance, and the situation where the utterance occurs, etc. Therefore the viewer can easily set up a relationship between the above contextual variables and the stylistic differences such the language's being tentative vs. direct, polite vs. impolite, formal vs. informal, strong and blunt, etc (Arnold & Harmer; 1984).

Third, as a moving picture book, video gives access to things, places, people, events, and behavior, (regardless of the language used) and is worth thousands of picture dictionaries and magazines. It is difficult to fulfill this range of functions except by living in an English-speaking country. It brings the English-language world to the learner. Now let us describe some of the ways of using movie films in language classrooms as a means for the purpose of developing in students' minds an understanding for cultural diversity.

The movie films must be selected appropriately in terms of types and content of the material to be used. First of all, the video resources that can be used is not limited to popular feature films but they may show a wide range of variation such as drama programs (films, sitcoms, soaps), documentaries on interesting subjects, daily news and weather broadcasting, sports programs, talk and game shows, commercials, movie trailers and TV cartoons (animated cartoons). Secondly, when selecting material for students from different cultures, videos containing taboo language and taboo subject matter should be avoided. Therefore the language teacher must be aware of the taboo issues in the culture of the students. Finally, language teachers should not forget that feature films are not always suitable for all ages. So the rating systems must be taken into consideration. Now let us consider certain general activities that the teacher may perform or that the teacher may encourage the students to perform before, during or after viewing the video material (Sherman, 2003, pp.123-170).

After choosing an appropriate video material, the teacher may prepare the students by doing certain general activities, before viewing, such as:

- Making some research in internet about the cultural topics and themes covered,

- Finding some background information about these cultural topics and themes,
- Preparing a list of key vocabulary related to cultural subjects in question,
- Generating some class discussion on the cultural elements covered in the movie.
- Passing out some worksheet about the cultural elements discussed in the class.

Similarly the teacher may carry out some general activities during or after viewing like:

- Assigning written homework on subjects concerning culture,
- Analyzing behaviors, habits, customs of characters,
- Letting students talking about cultural events,
- Letting students talk about the way the theme is dealt with,
- Explaining the characteristics of the language, (i.e. the stylistic properties of the discourse),
- Discussing the traditions and beliefs of people etc,
- Letting students act out the roles in some scenes,
- Generating some class discussion on students' impressions about the cultural elements in the movie or video elements.

Some specific activities in using movie films could contribute towards learning different cultural elements. The teacher should watch the movie together with students episode by episode and ask them to find out the unusual, strange or different behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, and body language they were able to observe during viewing. Then the teacher may ask the students to explain why they are like that. After the students' replies are given and compared in the class, the teacher should relate his own answer and explain what they mean and what message should be understood from them.

Such a specific cultural element can be, for instance, *greetings*. The teacher may give students a form or an outline to complete while they watch and listen to a dialogue in the video. After the class views the episode, the teacher can invite students to discuss the cultural norms and values of greetings in that society. Topics may be extended to cover nonverbal behaviors like, the physical distance between speakers, gestures, mimics, eye contact, social roles, and how people in different social roles relate to each other. Students can also describe the behaviors

they observe and they can discuss which of them are similar to their native culture and which are not. Then the class can talk about the ways of an effective communication with the native speakers of the target language.

Another effective way of raising awareness in the different cultural elements is the teacher's asking students to act out certain roles based on miscommunication and cultural differences. The aim is learning about ways of addressing different groups of people in the target culture, such as people of the same age and older people. After watching scenes where such dialogues take place, students learn their roles of speech in a situation in which an inappropriate greeting is used. Other students observe the role play and try to identify the reason for the miscommunication. Then they replay their roles in the same situation using a culturally appropriate form of address.

The aim of this activity is to recognize and describe body language. Any sequence where gestures and body language are very clear and reveal significant feelings and reactions in drama, speeches, sports, and competitions can be chosen. The teacher views with the sound off, gets the students to observe carefully and say what the characters do with body, hands, legs, face and head. Then the teacher asks the students to imitate the body language and then write down in two columns what the person does and what this reveals.

Conclusion

In this research, first the need for learning foreign and second languages was stressed as an inevitable part of life in a globalizing world where communication has to be maintained among nations speaking different languages. Then the possibility of benefitting from the close and interdependent relationship between language and culture for the purpose of contributing to social cohesion and peace in the world, particularly in parts of the world where all sorts of cultural biases and hostilities are strong and threaten a peaceful cohabitation of different people in the same area. This possibility was explained to be realized in the language teaching practices through using various types of video materials, especially movie films to eradicate cultural stereotypes and to promote

intercultural understanding, universally shared values and human rights. Video materials chosen appropriately and with rich content describing different aspects of culture of different people in language classrooms was considered to be a very appropriate tool to enhance the understanding of cultural diversity and to get the sense of cultural awareness and the sense of the humanity of other people. This practice of using movie films in promoting cultural understanding in language classrooms was claimed to be in line with the tasks of the UNESCO and its aim of promoting the cultural diversity through innovative strategies.

Then the reasons for why movie films and video documents are believed to be useful in enhancing the understanding of cultural diversity were explained and an account of the ways, certain general and specific activities of using movie films as a means of developing an understanding for cultural diversity while teaching a foreign or second language was given. It is believed that the practice of using movies in learning about the other culture and of recognizing the members of the other groups by means of observing the cultural elements in video documents in the peaceful environment of a classroom is a secure and beneficial way to enhance intercultural understanding among members of different cultural groups. Without considering this cultural awareness and understanding in language learning, a successful communication cannot be achieved.

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